

## Post Graduate Students' Experiences with Research Supervisors

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**ABSTRACT** This study examined the experiences and challenges of post graduate students with research supervisors. The study adopted an interpretive qualitative research methodology and a case-study research design. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with 40 post graduate students from 2 South African Universities in the Eastern Cape Province. In addition, questionnaires were also used as the main instrument of obtaining the feedback from the students. The study found that only a few students claimed satisfaction with their supervisors. However, it is noticed that a significant percentage (75%) of respondents are not satisfied at all with supervisors' feedback in relation to their research work. Their insufficient knowledge of the relevant field, change of supervisors due to transfer to other institutions, lack of supervisory support and supervisor's other work load have been identified as challenges facing some of the post graduate students in this study. The study recommends training of supervisors in research supervision. Issues to be addressed in the training of supervisors should include training in research methodology, technical expertise, managing the supervision relationship, quality control, providing constructive criticism and feedback and ethical concerns.

### INTRODUCTION

Much of the literature on post graduate studies recognises post graduate supervision as a process involving complex academic and interpersonal skills (Craswell 1996; Aspland and Edwards 1999; Bartlett and Mercer 2001; Taylor 2002; Bak 2004; Mapesela and Wilkinson 2005). These skills include guiding post graduate students towards sound proposal preparation, methodological choices, documenting and publishing their research, maintaining both supportive and professional relationships, as well as reflecting on the research process. Considering supervision, thoughtfully using reflection strategies such as challenging dominant ideas or redefining a problem, requires higher order-thinking and deep approaches to learning (Heath 2002). These requirements pose challenges to most post graduate research supervisors.

Post graduate research is a form of apprenticeship taken under the supervision of senior faculty members. The faculty member involved in the supervision of post graduate research must have the right expertise to play the role of promoter/supervisor (Mutula 2009). Worldwide the completion rate for post graduate students ranges from poor to bysmaal (Lubbe et al. 2005). The

responsibility for this must be shared by candidates, supervisors and the institutions to which they belong. In particular, supervisors create a number of problems that cause post graduate students' studies to derail. Research suggests that up to half of the students who begin post graduate studies do not complete their studies at all (Golde and Dore 2001). This is because there are a wide variety of problems that students face top of the range being supervisor-supervisee relationship. Little discussion is taking place, and little research is being done about the low completion rate of post graduate students, possibly because it is an embarrassment to supervisors (Lubbe et al. 2005).

In a study on experiences of post graduate students, Golde and Dore (2001) note that more than 40% of the postgraduate students reported that they would pick a different topic if they could start all over again, while 46% stated that they would select a different supervisor if they were given the opportunity to do so. About a third of the respondents noted that they would select a different field if they had to redo their post graduate studies (Lubbe et al. 2005). Clearly, the selection of the right topic and the right supervisor are crucial because post graduate study is supposed to optimise a candidate's future career and research options.

Golde and Dore (2001) state that the training that post graduate students receive is not what they want and it does not prepare them for the jobs that they take. As a contributor to the British Academy of Management's annual doctoral

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symposium, one of the authors has been disturbed by the obvious lack of training and institutional support that many post graduate candidates seem to be receiving.

In the UK, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) stipulate that:

- § Supervisors should possess recognised subject expertise.
- § Supervisors should have the necessary skills and experience to monitor, support and direct research students' work.
- § Research students should receive support and direction sufficient to enable them to succeed in their studies.
- § The progress made by research students should be consistently monitored and regularly communicated to the students (Lubbe et al. 2005).

A study focusing on LIS schools in East, Central and Southern Africa on the supervisor-supervisee relationship among postgraduates revealed the following: delays in receiving feedback, lack of guidelines stipulating supervision, poor supervision, that is, no schedule for meetings, no records of discussions, etc., no mechanisms for redress, 40% supervisors were always too busy to meet students, heavy teaching loads for faculty members (Mutula 2009).

The supervisor has a major role to play in the coaching guiding and mentoring of the post-graduate student. According to Lubbe et al. (2005), in the UK, the number of (failed or unhappy) PhD students who seek to resolve their issues through the courts is increasing with several institutions having been the subject of legal action where it has been argued that they have shown an insufficient 'duty of care' to their students.

Supervisors are mentors whose main duties are to guide students in intellectual matters, namely the appropriateness of their research design, the validity of their research problem, the quality and progress of their literature survey, the development of an appropriate theoretical framework for interpreting the results of their research, how to deal with unanticipated problems and the overall production of the written output (Lubbe et al. 2005). Generally, a good supervisor will pay as much attention to a student's research program as the student does but while the supervisor is responsible for guiding the student, it is clearly the student's responsibility to manage their project.

In a study conducted in Botswana by Mutula (2009), the students were asked when they consulted their supervisors and responded as follows: once a week (28%); once in four weeks (16%); once in two months (16%); once in more than two months (8%); 3 to 4 times a year (4%); no time specified – depends on the supervisor (16%); and by mutual agreement (16%). 56% of the respondents preferred one supervisor, while 32% preferred more than one. Those who preferred more than one supervisor stated that they required one supervisor to cover the absence of the other (when necessary), and more supervisors meant a wider range of opinion, which added value to the research process. Whereas some supervisors guided students on what sources to use (64%), others (32%) did not. Those candidates who preferred one supervisor said that if a supervisor is well-versed on a subject, there is no need for more supervisors. They noted that with more than one supervisor, there are delays in getting feedback because one has to wait for both parties to agree (Mutula 2008).

Authors (Seagram et al. 1998; Knowles 1999; Wisker and Sutcliffe 1999) indicate the relationship with supervisors as a key factor in study success. Good supervision is central to successful post graduate research, yet it is a teaching-learning process poorly understood. This may be an important reason why students experience the process as complex and often unstable (Mouton 2007). However, support and training for supervisors are high on the agenda in many institutions. A collection of papers in a well-orchestrated book (Zuber-Skerritt and Ryan 1994) provides ample proof of this, while more recently, two linked schemes have been developed in Australia to provide better support for academics involved in the supervision of post graduate students (Cryer and Mertens 2003).

### Research Questions

The main research questions of this study were:

1. Are you satisfied with your supervisor?
2. What challenges are you facing with your supervisor?

### METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive methodology because it allowed the researchers

to get the data directly from the subjects themselves by sitting with the respondents and hearing their views, voices, perceptions and expectations in detail. This strategy contends that knowledge is subjective and ideographic, and truth is context-dependent and can only be obtained after entry into participants' reality. The researchers recognised several nuances of attitude and behaviour that could not have been noticed if other methods had been used. This study adopted a case-study research design. A case study is described as a form of descriptor research that gathers a large amount of information about one or a few participants and thus investigates a few cases in considerable depth (Thomas and Nelson 2001).

Purposive convenience sampling was adopted in the selection of participants for this study. This type of non-probability sampling method seeks information-rich cases which can be studied in depth (Patton 1990). A sample of 40 post graduate students from two Universities in the Eastern Cape Province constituted the study. Each University contributed twenty participants, that is, ten Masters and ten PhD's. Convenience purposive sampling was employed in order to come up with the actual participants for this study.

### Data Analysis

In this study data analysis was approached by treating each case on its own at first, and then cross-case analysis followed. The researchers gathered together the number of answers on each research question answered. The raw data from interviews was coded to create data sets. Responses were treated according to the research questions they were responding to and, in the process, made up data sets X and Y. The researchers then came up with inductive themes related to each research question.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section reviews the major findings of the research through a synthesis of the results from interview data. This research has identified seven critical areas of concern by post graduate students with regard to their experiences with research supervisors. Data analysis and discussion thus revolved around the identified categories which are as detailed below:

- (a) The supervisor is too busy to be effective in his/her role.

- (b) Feedback from supervisor.  
 (c) The supervisor's level of commitment and interest.  
 (d) Tensions and conflicting perspectives within the supervisory role.  
 (e) Communication and disagreements about the research project.  
 (f) Selfishness and disrespectfulness.  
 (g) Limited knowledge and expertise in the field of study.

Generally, the findings of this research revealed that the reality of the role played by the respondents' supervisors is different from the role of their ideal supervisor in many respects.

### 1. The Supervisor is too Busy to be Effective in His/Her Role

It emerged that the most common supervisor-related problem that post graduate students face is having a supervisor whose extensive commitments make them too difficult to get hold of. This view was articulated by both Masters Degree students (40%) and PhD students (60%). Students indicated that this comes as a result of supervisors having too many other students to supervise or to attend to, heavy lecturing obligations as well as attending meetings. Respondents thus expressed discontentment with the level of support and guidance that they receive from supervisors and that all this did not reflect their view of an ideal or effective supervisor. This has far reaching consequences on student progress and the advancement of research in general. The following excerpts from some of the interviewed students were informative:

*Each time I visit my supervisor, he always complained of time constraints. At one time he had to cut short our session so as to attend to an emergency departmental meeting. On another incident we could not meet as he had gone out for a conference (Med student).*

*On two different occasions my supervisor had to cancel our appointments on account of conflicting responsibilities. At one time he said he had to prepare his class for an examination which the class would take the following week. On another occasion he ended up sending me some handouts for reading, arguing that his schedule of activities was tight (Doctoral student).*

The above sentiments point towards one critical issue that is prevalent in post graduate re-

search namely the non-availability of the supervisor. Alluding to the importance of supervisor availability Health (2002) postulates that supervisors should meet with students regularly, setting aside adequate time for students, and being contactable through several media such as email and phone. The findings of this research match the literature in which many authors highlighted the fact that the most important role of the supervisor is to guide students (Cryer 2000; Brown 2007). Donald et al. (1995), allude to this view by arguing that many tasks of the supervisors to research students are related broadly to guidance and advice. Generally this guidance and advice relates to direction, clarity, methodology, topic selection and data collection as well as giving feedback on the progress of written work (Kearsley 1998).

Research has repeatedly shown that constant, thoughtful supervision and availability is the key to successful graduate programme completion (Bak 2004; Toncich 2006). A study carried out in the UK by Moses has revealed that there is a high number of students who failed to complete their studies and the most frequently cited problems is the nature of the supervision given. Therefore a supervisor and student must have a very good relationship and be very close to each other. In short, the student-supervisor relationship is very important in ensuring that the students make consistent progress and successfully manages to present his/her thesis on time.

## 2. Feedback from Supervisor

There was a general consensus among the participants that the issue of feedback was highly problematic in post graduate research. Whereas 40% of the participants complained of receiving too little feedback from their supervisors, 25% raised the concern that supervisors tend to give feedback which conflicts with previous feedback. Therefore the issue of consistency in the provision of feedback remains a critical matter in post graduate research and supervision. Some students in this study were quick to point out that such feedback should cut across time. Delayed and infrequent feedback was also cited by 15 percent of the participants as having a huge toll on student progress towards completing their thesis as well as on the quality of the research. The following remark from one of the student bears testimony to the above:

*My supervisor is good in terms of helping me to find literatures, but one thing about correcting or commenting my work, he normally takes longer time than what I have expected (Master's degree student).*

It is embarrassing to find that some comments that are raised by external assessors relate to background and basic methodological issues found in the first and third chapter of the PhD thesis. Most of such issues could have been identified and addressed way back by the supervisor if at all he/she was prompt in feedback.

The student sentiments above tally with Mouton's (2007) comments that students see an ideal supervisor not only as one who provides prompt feedback but also constructive criticism of their work.

Still on the issue of feedback, some students argued that too much negative feedback relative to encouraging and positive comments was highly problematic in their research endeavours. Twenty percent of all the participating students subscribed to this view. Contributing to the debate on the value of feedback in research supervision, Taylor (2002), argues that feedback has an overwhelming influence on post graduate students' study, research behaviour and performance. Therefore the effectiveness and quality of formative feedback that post graduate students get from their supervisors is critical to their success in research. Effective feedback is acknowledged as a crucial factor in students' successful completion of their postgraduate studies. Therefore feedback remains a critical mechanism of ensuring that the students make good progress towards completion of their theses.

## 3. The Supervisor's Level of Commitment and Interest

The level of commitment and interest held by the supervisor was cited as a critical success factor in post graduate research. Naturally, this means that a supervisor who lacks commitment to, or interest in research poses serious problems for post graduate students. On this issue a significant number (65%) of the participants indicated that a good number of their supervisors seem to lack the requisite commitment and interest in their supervisory roles. In order to tap into the rich lived experiences of the participants with regards to lack of commitment and interest by supervisors, the researcher probed for more

information on this matter and the following responses were found insightful:

*My supervisor seem to lack commitment and interest in my work as evidenced by his lack of presence for consultation and lack of enquiry into the progress that I am making.*

*My supervisor makes little or no effort to encourage or motivate students and they do not give guidance and direction on issues and questions raised.*

*My supervisor does not cooperate well with students and neither does he help the student to develop skills necessary for his/her growth.*

The above sentiments are consistent with Cryer and Mertens's (2000) view that for students to experience success in their post graduate studies, they need supervisors who are positive, empowering, motivational and committed. He goes on to add that such supervisors are often in the vicinity of their students and are likely to show an interest in the students' progress.

#### **4. Tensions and Conflicting Perspectives within the Supervisory Panel**

Critical impediments faced by students in graduate research supervision relate to tensions and conflicting perspectives within co-supervisors. This issue was raised by 40% of all the PhD students who were under joint supervision of two or more supervisors. This study established that over 70 percent of all the PhD students were receiving supervision from two academics, with one of them being the main supervisor overseeing and acting as a superintendent in the whole research while the others just play subordinate and complementary roles. The logic behind co-supervision as conceived by Mutula (2009) is that with more supervisors assisting one student there is a wider range of opinion which add value to the research process. This view seems to be fully supported by some sentiments raised by some students as illustrated below:

*"Co-supervision exposed me to a wide array of ideas, thoughts, and views" (PhD student).*

*In co-supervision, each supervisor would cover the absence of the other so that there is continuity in the research process (Masters degree student).*

Lending his support to the issue of joint supervision, Taylor (2002) asserts that co-supervision may overcome some of the shortcomings of one-to-one partnerships, enriching the project with specialised knowledge and diversity of opi-

nion. He goes on to add that students can also benefit from the additional critical input and personal support that such an arrangement makes available

However, over 58% of the participants argued that the idea of co-supervision tends to present more problems and challenges than solutions in graduate research supervision. There was a general concurrence that having to manage the relationship between co-supervisors who do not get along with each other was a substantial problem for students. Similarly, students find it problematic when they receive conflicting advice and opinions from each supervisor. These findings link very well with Mutula (2008) who observes that with more than one supervisor, there are delays in getting feedback because one has to wait for both parties to agree. This view is reinforced by Bak (2004) who remarks that co-supervision is not always smooth sailing. If there are disagreements among supervisors, students can receive conflicting advice. New interpersonal dimensions come into play in this arrangement and if not well handled, can derail the process of completing a PhD or Master's thesis.

#### **5. Communication and Disagreements about the Research Project**

This research revealed that poor communication and disagreements about the research project between the supervisor and the student is a common cause of complications in graduate research. This is particularly so if the supervisor and the student have conflicting or unrealistic expectations of each other. Whereas 40% of the PhD students in the study said that disagreements with their supervisors centred on what the aims of their projects were, 35 percent of the same group indicated that they experienced disagreements with their supervisors with regards to how best to use and interpret their findings. These responses attest to the failure by many supervisors and students to strike a common understanding about what each person should expect of the other.

Poor communication and disagreements between supervisors and students has been shown to have negative consequences on the research process and its outcome. Such consequences range from misunderstanding between parties, time wastage, and frustration of one or more parties. This has the direct consequence that in most cases the student is faced with a project that is too large to be completed in the stipulated

timeframe. In this regard, Lubbes et al. (2000) point out that ideal supervisors have good communication skills. They go on to elaborate that such skills should include good listening skills, the tendency to maintain an open dialogue about the project, its progress and problems, the ability to communicate in an open, honest, and fair manner about issues that arise as they arise and making expectations clear with regard to matters such as the process of completing PhD or Master's thesis.

### 6. Selfishness and Disrespectfulness

Students had a feeling that a number of supervisors display selfishness and a lack of respect for their students. This was perceived as a constraining factor in graduate research supervision. The following sentiments were typical in this regard:

*As a student I struggle when my supervisor fails to realise, appreciate and respect that I have a life that extend beyond my thesis work (Masters degree student).*

*I find it difficult to work with supervisors who only look at their own gains from the student's research (PhD student).*

*Some supervisors tend to push the research down paths that interest them but not necessarily the student (PhD student).*

Knowles (1999) argue that on both the departmental level and individual basis, the supervisor must be diligent about explicitly working with students to establish mutual expectations, responsibilities and benefits for working together and with other parties

### 7. Knowledge and Expertise in the Field of Study

The study revealed that some post graduate students have a lot of reservations with regard to supervisors' knowledge and expertise in their fields of study. While students admitted that expecting supervisors to have expertise in the precise topics of their research would be asking too much, they however, maintained that supervisors need to be well versed with the general methodologies required in their research. A related issue raised by PhD students relate to the apparent lack of experience in research and/ or supervision by some supervisors.

The twin challenges of limited knowledge and expertise as well as the lack of experience in re-

search supervision by supervisors has grave implications on the quality of graduate research. It is axiomatic that a supervisor with limited knowledge and expertise in the field of study or in research supervision poses numerous problems for graduate research students. As noted by Cryer and Mertens (2003), such supervisors tend to make little or no effort to encourage or motivate the student, and further they fail to give guidance and direction on issues and questions raised. The problem of a supervisor who is not up-to-date with the field means the supervisor is unable to help problem-solve and advise. In some cases, being out of date with the field means supervisors are ignorant of the optimal techniques and theories that exist. This has overall implications on the quality of research that is produced.

Brown (2007) suggests that to supervise effectively, one has to be a competent researcher and to be able to reflect on research practices and analyse the knowledge, techniques and methods that make them effective. Andresen (1999) expands on this view by observing that often it is sufficient for the supervisor to be competent in the general area of the student's research even if not an expert in the detailed area of the thesis topic.

### CONCLUSION

The study found that students are not getting enough time with their supervisors because the supervisors are overworked. As a rule of thumb, an overloaded supervisor, even though well-intentioned, is unlikely to be an effective supervisor. It also emerged that there is an acute shortage of qualified supervisors. Students in this study mentioned that some supervisors have an outdated approach.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Research supervisors should possess recognised subject expertise and should be trained in order to equip them with research skills.
- Universities should appoint supervisors who have the necessary skills and experience to monitor, support and direct research students' work.

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